

GUEST OPINION

School budget sells our students short

Today, I am wearing my school teacher hat and I am handing out grades: For its work on the 2009 fiscal year School Aid budget, the Michigan Senate gets an A for effort, but for results, it needs improvement.

That may seem like a harsh assessment. After all, as the state Legislature makes its way through the various 2009 budgets, lawmakers have had to work across the aisle to forge compromises and reach agreements. This was certainly the case with the K-12 budget.

While I applaud my colleagues' spirit of cooperation, I cannot applaud the outcome. As a former educator of 19 years and a school psychologist, I'm afraid the K-12 budget sells our kids short.

Reducing the size of high schools is a key aspect of the School Aid budget. On the surface, this sounds like a great idea. But research has shown very mixed results from smaller high schools. The keys to educating our young people as they go through school are excellent, innovative, adaptive teaching; capable teachers; and first-rate curricula. This cannot start when students enter high school. This approach must begin very early in elementary school for those who start struggling, fall behind, and never catch up. Yes, they can catch up with early appropriate intervention, but by the time a student reaches ninth grade, it's often too late.

For the sake of argument, let's consider that smaller high schools can sometimes be an effective remedy for educational maladies. That does not justify setting aside \$15 million — the cost of this project — to implement this plan. Any school district today in Michigan, through its administrative leadership and its school board, can create smaller high schools or smaller high schools within high schools if they so choose this as an identified goal.

It is a question for local teachers and parents to decide in the best interests of their children. It does not require \$15 million in state funds.

When talking with the superintendents in my district, they asked me to oppose this development. These educators have the requisite experience and academic wisdom to determine the necessity of such a plan.

Whereas the K-12 budget speaks to smaller high schools — an unnecessary part of the budget — it fails to adequately address systemic reforms, which are a critical aspect to fixing what is really broken in our schools.

For instance, this budget keeps categoricals going that could be ended, which would then provide millions and millions of dollars to be embedded in the

foundation grants. In turn, local school districts could direct this money where the dollars are most needed for their particular situation.

Again, this is a matter of locals maintaining and exercising their decisionmaking power and control. After all, they are closest to the parents and the students that they represent.

The 2009 K-12 budget is the first one I did not support in my legislative career. Unfortunately this budget did not merit my vote. But I am proud that I did the right thing by thinking of what's best for Michigan children when casting my vote.

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